MILTON AND PARTY

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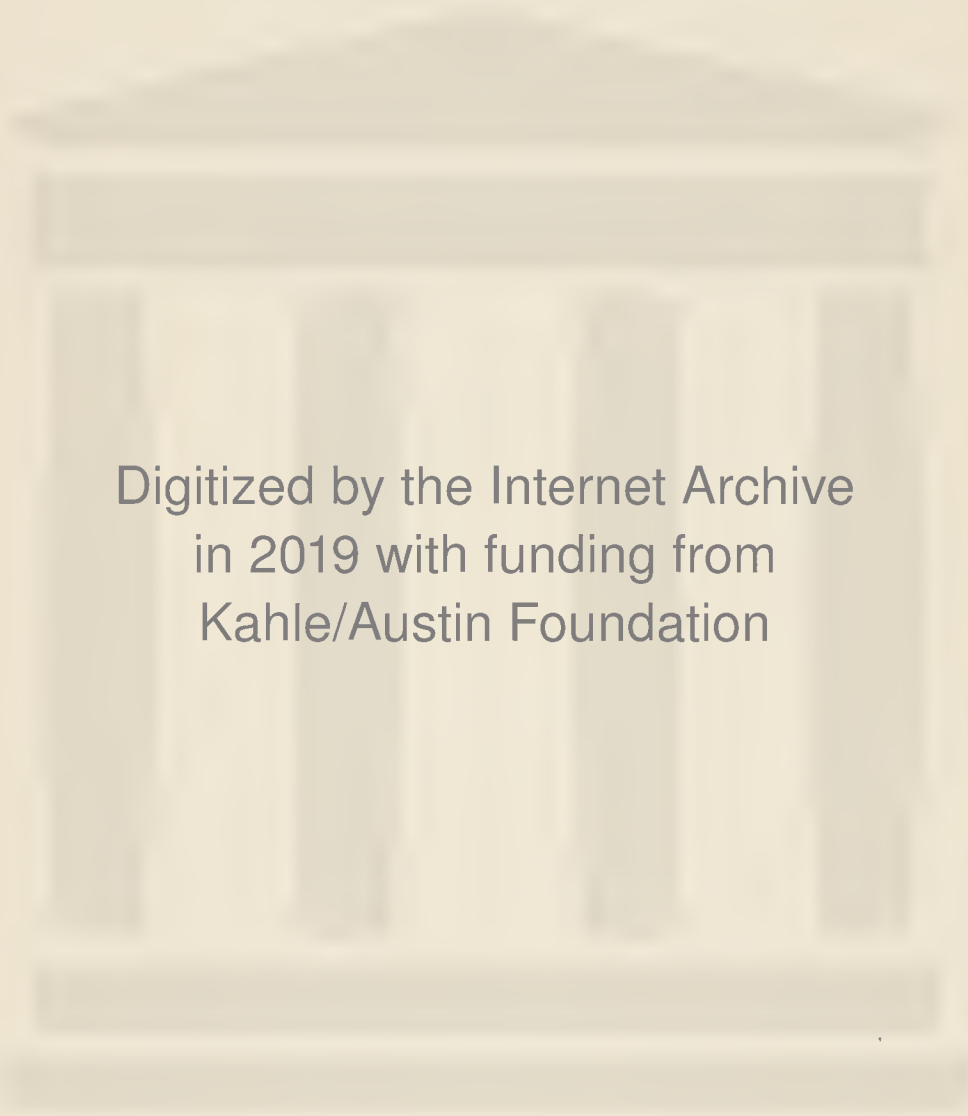
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# Milton and Party

By

Professor O. Elton, M.A.

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# MILTON AND PARTY[1]

No greater honour could fall to me from the hand of the English Association, whose aim we try to further in one of the northern capitals—we have several of them—than the perilous duty of celebrating the memory of Milton here. As I look down the profiles at this Attic feast, I wish that, instead of speaking, I were listening to some worthier scholar, perhaps to some sounder Puritan; but I also think of that delicate, festal, sociable side of Milton himself, of which he has left us some inkling; of his sensibility to an

> order so contriv'd as not to mix
> Tastes not well join'd, inelegant, but bring
> Taste after taste upheld with kindliest change.

And I remember how even in his august age, when the smouldering fires of his nature seemed to be banked, he liked cheerful converse in the evening, and also now and again, says the authority, 'a pipe of tobacco.' To the last, there are flashes of a graciousness, an amenity about Milton, there is a kind of warm gray spread over spaces of *Paradise Regained*, which lets us see how much was left in him of the *Penseroso*, how much of it had nobly outlived all the strange tempestuous voyages of his imagination and intellect. One likes to think how (to speak venturously) he carried this graciousness into the other world. For we remember how, 'very grave but very neatly attired in the fashion of the day,' he appeared in a dream, in the year 1793, to William Cowper, and received his admiration. 'He answered me by a gentle inclination of the head. He then grasped my hand affectionately, and with a smile that charmed me, said, "Well, you for your part will do well also." He took his [leave] with an air of the most perfect good breeding.' Cowper deserved this, and therefore had the right to praise. It is not easy to assume such a right, for there is something about Milton that silences empty praise—what with his

[1] An address read at the Dinner of the English Association (November 27, 1908) in commemoration of the Milton Tercentenary.

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defeat of the centuries that have passed—and that makes us chary to anticipate 'all-judging Jove'. Nor are these stray words addressed to such an attempt: for perhaps there is more need now to understand than to praise. A tercentenary! it sounds as though it were high time to understand. But there are things in Milton that require clearing up, and though I am chiefly here to ask questions (in the intervals of repeating the obvious) rather than to solve them, I will say, that in Milton's art there is that which has never been properly caught and characterized. One thing is the style, the movement, the half-invisible veinings, of his latest poems, and another is the exact colouring of his Horton poems. We want a fresh review of his prose, appreciative and methodized; for this the heroic labours of Masson have laid a foundation. But now I am not saying much of his art and style, for they only served, after all, to give enduring form to some things in his mind and temper of which I prefer to speak. Milton's art and style serve to cover up, if also to express, a conflict within him—though not a conscious one, I do not say that for a moment—which is only the reflection of a larger conflict without him. Part of it goes on in English life to-day, and perhaps in some of ourselves.

We are creatures of the dead, and our political and doctrinal passions are the ghosts, or rather the re-embodiment, the transmigrated essence and result, the *Karma*, of theirs. More simply, and I suppose admittedly:—The parties and mental cleavages of the great civil war in some sense persist to-day, in the broad social divisions of the country and in their contrasting war-cries. In spite of all the other great historic forces that have come into play, in spite of the ambiguity of changing terms, *puritan*, *tory*, *popular*, and the bad fallacy of lightly transferring these to and fro between epochs of different complexion, much of that old schism persists. This may be a commonplace; it never came home to me till I lived in the North of England, that old theatre of war, where the descendants of both parties are very distinguishably massed. Through all the complications and cross-purposes—of which the greatest, by the way, is that introduced by Whiggism—we feel, I say, the tug between the class that stands for the political and ecclesiastical hierarchy, for the fundamental principle of gentry, for tradition; the class with the cult of manners, yes, and still with four-fifths of the inheritance of

humanism!—the tug between this class and that other one, which in its political instincts, its ritual, its homes, its reading, its language, its whole way of making its life and soul and conscience, is the opposite. Get out of the London whirl or of southern county life, and you find the Ironsides, now with rather a varnish of culture, with a cote-armure over the mail, but always ready to form up in line, and very like what they were. Delightful and attractive as the blended type of the Puritan gentleman is—a type tenacious too in its way—it is occasional, and does not bulk very large beside the serried armies on either hand. Nor should I hastily say that the author of *Colasterion* was the most perfect embodiment of that type. Well, I say the blood of one or other of these parties is in most of us. And I add that Milton has proved, for many historians and critics, a test case, that our judgement on him shows where our heart really lies. For an impartial, distant treatment of Milton is likely to be an empty and bloodless one, if it means that these disputes are a mere matter of the intellect to us, and that *neither* element is alive to us; but that all the same, if we have *both* elements alive in us, to some such impartial treatment of him it is high time, at his tercentenary, to come. I am not here to do more than name some of the errors that seem to lie in the path of such a treatment.

With those who take Milton not only for a great champion of popular liberty, which he is, but also for a typical out-and-out Puritan, and who love or hate him for that reason either openly or covertly, we are entitled, I think, at this season of the world, to be rather short. I saw in a magazine the other day 'that Milton is the very embodiment of Hebraism'. We feel that Macaulay sees little else clearly in Milton except a particular kind of politician. We feel that Johnson, whose admiration—what there is of it—is of all the more value for being extorted, has a sound sense of all that element in Milton, which, if valid, would annihilate the ideas by which Johnson lived; and we feel that this gives value to Johnson's criticisms. I do not mean this wholly at Johnson's expense; for Johnson was really a mystic, and Milton seems to have been to his roots unmystical, and in that way he most imperfectly represents Protestantism. *Omnia abeunt in mysterium*; Bunyan feels that in his Protestant way, just as Johnson feels it in his Catholic way: but if Milton had anything answering to what is technically called *experience*, there is little sign

of it. I say this in passing, both to show what we can get out of a critic who is violently unjust to Milton, and also for the benefit of a text at which I shall presently arrive. But we need not stay longer for the moment with those who like or dislike Milton because they think he is a Puritan out and out, a man who for good or ill is all of one piece. It is another line of comment that I wish to criticize.

People point to Milton and say: 'Look at his humanistic learning, and then at his hatred of privilege; look how he uses the form and morality of Sophocles for his *Samson*, or the form and movement of Homer and Virgil for his epics, and then look at his sublime versification of the Protestant theology. Look at his deep, his quintessential scholarship. See how he distilled all the imagery, the themes, the very grammar of the Greeks into his own, and then see how he did all this in the service of the Protestant conscience, of the individual soul and its rights. What a superb harmony of opposites! What a reconciliation of the two forces that seemed for ever at strife, the intellectual current that came from the Renaissance, and the spiritual current that came from the Reformation, which meet and unite in Milton, in one great, broad stream! Could there be a finer union than we find in Milton of the party that stood for culture, amenity, letters, and beauty, with the party that stood for conscience, liberty, for the naked claims of the soul? Let us take heart by this,' we are told, 'and never suppose that that strife is immitigable'!

Well, another conclusion can be drawn. I would say, first, that only in a very mutilated sense does Milton stand for either Renaissance or Reformation: and, secondly, that he does not, save at a few isolated points, harmonize them at all; nothing *can* harmonize them; that he rather exhibits their essential discord, though this truth is covered up by his powers of style and execution; and that he is so interesting because he tends to harmonize them and does not do so, though he shows no sign of knowing that he does not do so; and that this discord in Milton is at more than one point *our* discord; and that therefore his appeal is enduring so long as this latter discord, in the England of to-day, in our own minds, persists. This may be treated as a commonplace by many who hear me, but it is worth while thinking over, for others may treat it as a paradox.

Milton is a great political Protestant, and a great ecclesiastical

Protestant; that is true. If he belongs to no school, and is a sect by himself, with his own heresies—Arian leanings, Mosaic polygamy, fancy republicanism, and the rest, he is only a Protestant the more; we need not labour that point. Herein he *is* a great example of a national type. I dare say he would have been a passive resister; he would probably have handed up his copy of Salmasius or *Eikon Basilike* to the officers of the law in settlement. But although he was all this, and had his odd private eschatology, he seems to have missed, as I suggested, the deepest thing in Protestantism, its *experience*; and I think that that lack, and not his unfamiliar poetry and learning, is the reason why he was never really taken by Protestantism to its bosom. Then they say he was a son of the Renaissance; and so, on its Greek and plastic side, he was. But, on its intellectual side, save at one point of the field of political thought, and perhaps in the field of educational theory, he was not a son of the Renaissance at all. As regards the current of modern speculation that was set in motion by Bruno and Montaigne, and was to be continued, in diverse senses, by Hobbes and Spinoza, the Renaissance might as well never have existed for Milton. It did not exist for him as it existed for Shakespeare, on whose verse the spirit of the time plays so many strange and wandering airs. Milton had a very mediaeval side to his brain; he was anti-critical; and this was well, for he could never have written *Paradise Lost* had he been otherwise. For much as he embroiders his story, it is true and literal to him in its essence, as the hard, dry backing of texts in his *Christian Doctrine* shows. He has the necessary basis of literal conviction; and if his strong mind had worked freely upon the documents, as the oppositely built mind of Hobbes, for instance, worked upon them, he might have lost that basis. But this is not exactly a 'harmony' of Renaissance and Reformation.

Let us remind ourselves of one or two instances where the classical and the Protestant spirit clash rather than mix in Milton, especially in his poetry.

*Paradise Lost* is the tale of a civil war in the universe, where the foes of privilege and monarchy, the Cromwell and Hampden of heaven, secede, fight, fill the stage, occupy the sympathy, and then fail. The poet forces himself to join in the suitable thanksgivings, but his power begins to flag when he does so. He forces himself to

disfigure his heroes. His deity turns them into snakes, as some rancorous deity might in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. That, indeed, is rather a contradiction *within* Puritanism. The public and rebel passion, which Milton felt in himself and saw amongst his friends, can only, in the nature of his story, be on the wrong side; it can only inspire those whom he calls devils. He could not get out of this contradiction once he had chosen his story, which was the history of the universe, as his party read it, set in a classic frame. And his classic memories helped rather than increased the contradiction: his memories of Prometheus and Capaneus. Here the classical spirit does begin to be at odds with his official sympathies; and in another, a minor way, the Renaissance, though not the classics directly, increases or brings out the contradiction; for one of Milton's great masters of language was Marlowe:—

> I ban their souls to everlasting pains
> And extreme tortures of the fiery deep.

Which poet wrote these lines? And more than that; Satan, it is often said, is a Marlowe-like figure, has touches of *Tamburlaine*, touches of *Faustus*; in Satan, Milton comes nearest to that new freedom of the questing intellect which I said—perhaps too sweepingly—that he was without. In the other camp is his much modified but still recognizable Calvinistic God. The moment we press even thus far into Milton's story, can we feel that it has concord or unity? He is much more interesting, like all imperfect things and persons—like ourselves—when we find that there is not unity in him.

Look again at his representation of love and women. Milton has not much chivalry properly so called, though in some of his sonnets he shows a great courtesy. But he had a very clear and noble feeling for plastic beauty, for the human form, for sculpture, as we see from his Eve; nay, even for a sort of beautiful decorative luxury. His sonnet to his wife proves too how he realized the pure, gracious, and heroic in feminine character; his dreams of love, of Eros Urania, which are really better recorded in his Divorce Tracts than in *Comus*, were of the noblest; I omit the evidence in this company. But, in that pure plastic sensibility, he is nearly the last of our Renaissance artists for 200 years—I mean almost literally 200 years—until the poets of the middle nineteenth century. We need not dwell on the

other side, on his strident, barbarous theories of women, with their touch of John Knox, on his 'Turkish contempt for females'. Is this not a discord, and if so, is it an extinct discord?

Lastly, there is Milton's moral theology. The fall and retrieval of Samson, in his hands, is a far deeper topic than the fall and retrieval of man had been, because he now started from a Greek kind of theology, not from a peculiar Protestant myth or heresy; and the Greek way of looking at things recognizes deeper and more real complications in human nature and destiny than the theme of *Paradise Lost*, and settles them in a way that is nearer to truth. To pay for your fault, in one act, with your own blood and with the blood of others, whom it was your very fault before to have spared; so to fulfil your destiny, and so to leave 'nothing for tears', and so also to leave the beholder 'in calm of mind, all passion spent': this idea opens out spiritual horizons after the manner of the best Greek plays. The effect in no way depends on the historical truth of the story, as in *Paradise Lost*. Milton no doubt felt deeply that the old Hebrew episode lent itself to this kind of classic treatment in its very nature, and so he chose it. But this is not a union of the Reformation spirit and Sophocles; for Milton ceases to be a Protestant when he writes of such a retrieval as Samson's; it is a union of the Hebrew spirit and Sophocles, which is a different thing. When he does become Protestant and Puritan in this poem, it is because he interposes in person and speaks as the voice of a great, dispossessed, and righteous public cause. But here he leaves the subject; for it is clear that so far as Samson is Milton he is not an offender, and is the martyr of disaster rather than the erring subject of a tragedy.

No; if there was ever a harmony in Milton, it was before the latent opposition of these principles came out in him; it was in his early writing, when his verse, Latin or English, was always nobly sensuous, and only at times passionate: in his verses *Ad Patrem*, in *Arcades*, or the beginning of *Comus*, or even when Ens comes in with the Predicaments. When he did enter into warfare, we cannot say of him, as he says of the martyr Polycarp, 'that the fire, when it came to proof, would not do his work, but, starting off, like a full sail from the mast, did but reflect a golden light upon his unviolated limbs.' The fire did its work: it seemed to do a doubtful work, to destroy the happy harmony, the *euphuia*, that radiates from

*L'Allegro* or from *Epitaphium Damonis*; it did destroy just that: we can no longer say that the temperate, Puritan upbringing has given us a young man recalling Plato's characters. All through the prose works Milton's undying sense of beauty and his conscience tend to be at strife—I mean that the two interests conflict, not that Milton feels they do so—and that also is what I really mean by *our* discord; and when he regains himself, and goes back to art, the same opposition, as I have pleaded, persists, and is only the more fixed because a far ampler and a more nearly perfect art is its vehicle. We need not choose between the speech of his youth and that of his age, because we have them both; but if we ask which of the two means more to us, which we would rather keep at the cost of the other were the hard choice put to us, there is but one answer. For there seem but two things eternal on this earth, form and strife; and for the fullest expression of strife we need the most monumental form. Then only does the master take his seat, like Milton, among the immortals, and earn repose. The farewell of his Manoah to his Samson, Milton had versified in Latin, almost word for word, long before, over the friend of his youth, in lines that may be our salutation to Milton:—

> Nec te Lethaeo fas quaesivisse sub Orco:
> Nec tibi conveniunt lacrimae, neque flebimus ultra;
> Ite procul, lacrimae; purum colit aethera Damon . . .
> Heroumque animas inter, divosque perennes
> Aethereos haurit latices et gaudia potat
> Ore sacro.

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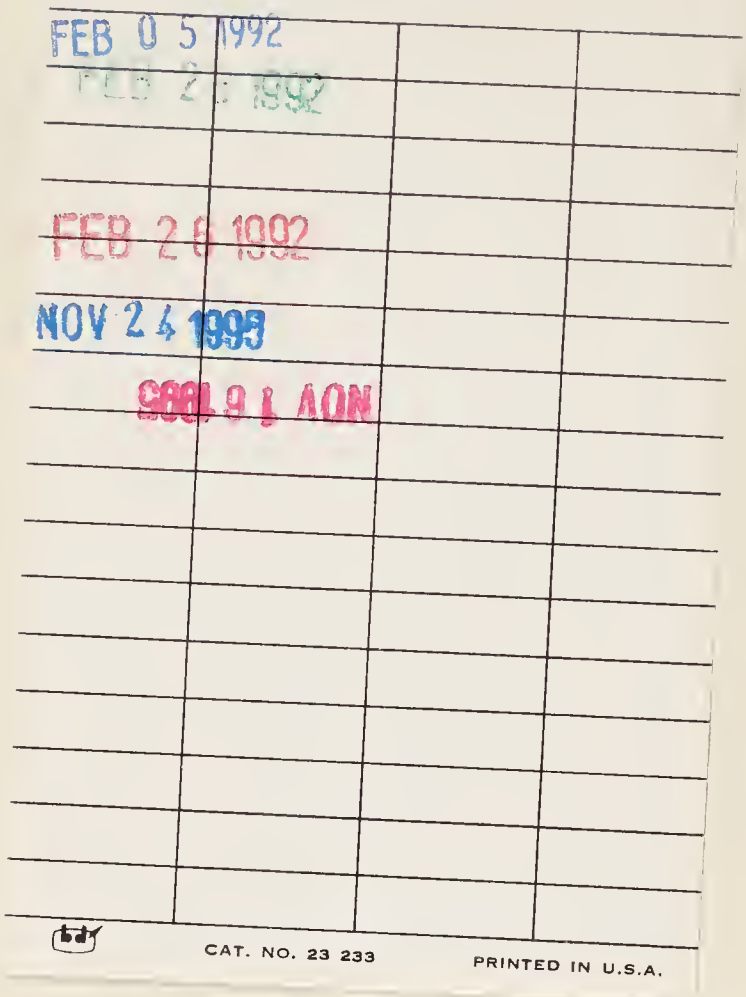

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